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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a speech by the President of the Mississippi University for Women (MUW), on the history of MUW and her secrets of success as an educator and administrator. The speech traces the history of MUW, founded in 1884 as the first public college for women in the United States. It lists the accomplishments of distinguished alumni, faculty, and administrators. The speech argues that MUW consistently graduates remarkable women because it treats people as individuals first and foremost and sets high standards for its students. The speech then looks at factors that contribute to success in life for women, such as being true to one's moral compass, establishing one's independence, keeping a sense of humor, and moving forward from adversity. The speech also examines the role of women in leadership and discusses factors that prevent women from succeeding in life. (MDM)

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**SPEECH
PRESENTED BY DR. CLYDA S. RENT
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1995
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
CLYDA S. RENT**

**PRESIDENT
MISSISSIPPI UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN (THE "W")
The first Public College for Women in America**

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Thank you, Dr. Carolyn Warner. What a remarkable speaker you are. Dr. Carolyn Warner is one of the few people I know who is frequently invited to speak twice! She is already invited back for a third time at "The W." I am honored to have the opportunity to speak at NASSP. What an impressive and large organization. You, as principals, high school teachers, or high school guidance counselors, have my highest regards.

Now, I have noticed that we have some mike problems and I understand that those in the back can't hear very well, so some of you in the front might want to move to the back! I love the opportunity to speak with colleagues and young people. I remember when I first became a professor many years ago. I was quite shy and self-conscious about speaking. Consequently, I was very anxious for feedback. We say at "The W" (as Warren Bennis says), "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." In one of my first classes I noticed a young woman in the back of the room who kept nodding her head as though she were agreeing with

me. After the class, she came up to me and said, "Oh, I just love to hear you speak. You are so fluent and decomposed."

And every time I speak, I remind myself of what they said about Calvin Coolidge, former President of the United States. They said that Calvin Coolidge didn't have much to say, and when he did, he didn't have much to say.

I was asked to talk to you today about my secrets of life. What I will talk about is what I have learned about education and life from "The W," which is what Mississippi University for Women, the first public college for women in America, is affectionately called. The secrets of life from life at "The W" is my topic. I feel very privileged to be at this historic university, founded in 1884, in the state of Mississippi which is deep in the heart of the South: a state about which most people still have misconceptions.

For example, you may not know that Mississippi is the first state, in 1839, to allow married women the right to own property. There is much good there, and we are increasingly demonstrating that we can do some things very right.

This remarkable institution boasts some 20,000 alums and has been around for 111 years. There is much to be learned from an institution like "The W," which is quite frankly one of the reasons I accepted the role as its first woman president — to learn exactly what was and is the magic formula of this historic institution. "The W" makes me think of the Swedish proverb, "The years teach

much which the days never knew." "The W" has a formula which has worked for over a hundred years. In order to tell you about this formula, I would like to tell you a story that I heard recently. I think it is particularly apropos since we are in San Antonio. This is the first time I have ever been to San Antonio and the first time I have visited the Alamo, and I am quite moved by the history of this area.

This is a story about a group of pioneers, a wagon train headed west to California. Two Texas Rangers were trying to track down the pioneers (By the way, I just watched four volumes of *Lonesome Dove*, so this is particularly graphic for me.) and had traveled for weeks trying to find them. Finally they came across an Indian lying down with his ear to the ground. The two rangers told the Indian they were looking for a wagon train and asked if he could help them. "Can you learn anything by listening to the ground"? The Indian got up and said, "Wagon train headed west. Had twelve big wagons, sixteen horses and two water wagons. Ten women and five children on foot and five pigs and a few chickens." The ranger asked, "Did you learn all that by listening to the ground with your ear?" The Indian said, "First wagon ran over me."

You can learn a lot by experience. "The W" has over a century of experience in the education of women.

In 1982 an historic decision of the United States Supreme Court required "The W" to admit men into nursing. The state governing board then required the university to admit men into all programs. We became Mississippi University for Women... and for Smart Men, too! We now have 20% male, and — as was mentioned by Dr. Warner — we have almost 22% African American students. We have grown 108 times the average of the other public institutions in the state and ten times the national average in the last five years. We have had the highest entering freshmen ACT among the Mississippi institutions of higher learning for two of those past five years.

"The W" is unique in that every single person on the campus is a minority, either by socio-cultural definition or statistically. It creates a very healthy environment, and one that is a very good training ground for our students. For a century and a decade, this institution repeatedly, in spite of floods, fires, tornadoes, and litigation has continued to produce people who are remarkable. There are many who are household names and others who are not household names, but you will recognize the contributions that they have made. What I have chosen to say today is from the wisdom of this institution and the people who have attended this institution and have gone on to practice their labors of love as you have practiced your labors of love in your schools today.

What is it about this institution that consistently puts out exceptional people like Eudora Welty, the Pulitzer Prize winning writer who lives in Jackson and who is now 85 years old? She is a person who has probably received virtually every award possible as an author or person of letters. She has been named a "national treasure" by the National Governors Association. People like Blanche Colton Williams who founded the famous O. Henry Prize, which is still today one of the most coveted prizes in literature. People who are not household names but who are mothers of very famous people, such as the mothers of William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. (Tennessee Williams was born about six blocks from our beautiful campus which boasts 24 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.) People like Dr. Elizabeth Hazen who discovered the drug nystatin. Nystatin is still a frequently prescribed drug for fungal infections. Then there are important people in Mississippi like:

- Dr. Ellen McDevitt, former chief of the Cardio-vascular Unit at New York Hospital.
- Mary Libby Payne who was just elected one of the first Appeal Judges in the State of Mississippi and was a founding dean at the College of Law at Mississippi College.

- Lenore Prather who is the first female Supreme Court Justice in Mississippi.
- Evelyn McPhail who has just been elected Co-Chair of the National Republican Party.
- Recently deceased National Secretary of the Democratic Party, Dorothy McElroy Bush.

These are the kinds of people who have come from the hallowed halls of this school. So, when I arrived at "The W" in 1989, I began a search to find out precisely why this school consistently graduates such remarkable women.

The first of the two-point formula at MUW is to take people as individuals first and foremost. From its inception in the 19th century, it did not matter that you were a woman. Upon admitting African Americans in 1966, it didn't matter that you were African American. And likewise, after coeducation was required by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1982, it didn't matter that you were male. The fact is, "The W's" philosophy and practice follows the lesson of the saying "I happen to be a person encased in a female body," or a person encased in an African American body, or a person encased in a male body. This institution is focused on each student as an individual, first and foremost.

The second enduring premise and practice of this institution for the entire span of its distinguished history is best said by a quote from Dean Rusk, former U.S. Secretary of State, "I expect the best from people and I typically get it." "The W" sets high standards, does not relax them for any group or person, and helps students achieve these standards. This, to me, has been the simple two-point strategy of this institution. Treat people as individuals and expect the best from them.

I have been asked to talk about secrets of my life. Rather than proposing any personal insights, I would like to draw on the remarkable alums of "The W" — people who were treated as individuals and were challenged to be their best.

Two weeks ago I was with Eudora Welty. She is 85 years old, physically fragile with a mind as fascinating and remarkable as ever. In fact, she is still writing. I told her that for her birthday in April "The W" is planning to have a big birthday party for her, but we will have to wait until April 1996 because the time to organize it is so short. She said, "Ooh, that puts a lot of pressure on me to stay around till then."

One of the first secrets of life, shared by the women of "The W," is they have a sense of humor. A sense of humor is a critical secret of life, whether it be for longevity or for happiness while you are living.

A good sense of humor is not restricted to our most famous alums. We ask our alums to recount their favorite memories. I received not long ago a letter from an alum who was in Eudora Welty's class, and she said her fondest memory was of Mr. Painter, her literature professor, her favorite professor. Mr. Painter is also the "W" professor Miss Welty immortalized in *One Writer's Beginnings*. Miss Welty said that Mr. Painter made literature come alive, "...as Mr. Painter read, poetry came into the room where we could see it and all around it, free-standing poetry. As we listened, Mr. Painter's, too, was a life class."

The alum, recounting her fondest memories, said she "never understood why Mr. Painter liked Eudora Welty's papers better than" hers!

Another quick story to share with you about the humor of these alums is a story of Dr. Ellen McDevitt. She was one of the early researchers on thrombosis and Vitamin C and was Chief of Staff of the cardiovascular unit at New York City Hospital. After she retired, she lived in Gulfport until her death recently. She was in her 80's and weighed 85 pounds. When I wanted a quick update on international or political events, I would call her because she was an astute and avid student of contemporary affairs. When I first went to see her, knowing that she had been a major figure in medical history, I was stunned to find out that she smoked. In fact, she smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. I said,

"Dr. McDevitt, I am really surprised to see that you smoke." She said, "Well, I have two vices. I smoke and I drink." Since I knew I would come back to see her, I thought I would ask her what she drank so I could bring a bottle of her favorite spirits. She paused and she said, "Well, in the morning..."! Whether she did or did not, there was a sense of humor. Dr. McDevitt reminds me of the man who was about to be executed and he was asked if he would like a last cigarette. He said, "No, I am trying to quit." Although she was in great pain, she never gave in or gave up.

Humor is, to me, one of the most important secrets to life and one of the things that I find has sustained this institution and its people. Whether it be faculty, staff, students, alums, supporters or whoever, humor abounds and is very important.

Now I would like to draw from the thoughts of Blanche Colton Williams, founder of the O. Henry Prize. She wrote in 1937, "Every single woman should have a home, not to be tempted to marry just for the sake of marriage!" What percentage of people marry for security? I love the quote from a noted historian, "More than freedom, more than anything, they wanted security, but in the end they lost it all."

If we could ever arrive at the point where every person was virtually economically independent, then marriage could occur when two people choose one another for the right reasons rather than the wrong ones. There is a great deal of wisdom in this for young women. Make sure that what you do is truly following your heart. I remember what Dorothy Parker said on the day following her divorce from Allen Parker. She said, "Oh, don't worry about Allen. He will always fall on somebody else's feet." For too many years, for too many decades, for too many centuries, the only way that women had a chance to have certain things, was to fall on someone else's feet. Every time we compromise and every time we settle, we lose something. There is something lost from the universe. I think that Florence Nightingale probably said it best when she said, "And so is the world put back by the death of everyone who has to sacrifice the development of his or her peculiar gifts (which was meant, not for selfish gratification, but for the improvement of that world) to conventionality" (*Cassandra*, 1852). One of the things that "The W" has always tried to remind young women, and now all of our students, is to look inside of themselves and be true to that internal geiger counter to which only they can hear the beat. We should truly never settle for less. To begin to settle is to ensure mediocrity and lack of fulfillment.

Mary Libby Payne, the newly elected Mississippi Appeal Judge, added another twist of wisdom, "You don't have to become an honorary male to succeed in the world." So many times women think they have to do things exactly as males do. Men bring unique contributions to the table, but women are also being recognized as sources of unique contributions. We all should follow our particular strengths, our abilities and utilize them unapologetically. So, another lesson, or secret, that I have found at "The W" is to follow your heart and not settle for less and play on your strengths.

Another important lesson, and I think sometimes it is more characteristic of women than of men is the ability to "shake off things." We tend to be dotters of I's and crossers of t's and focus in on things and not "let loose" of them. Mary Libby Payne who is, as we say, a "real hoot" advised that "you can waste all your life if you linger over an adversity rather than springboard from it." All of us are going to have disappointments and all of us will have wagons run over us. They say it's not important that you get knocked down but that you get back up. What we do with the cards that are dealt us is probably more important than anything else — how we handle adversity, or setbacks, or someone who betrays us. If you harbor it, it will hurt you and be counter-productive. Ellen Glasgow has said "women like to sit down with trouble as if it were knitting" (*The Sheltered Life*,

1932). Do we like to sit down with trouble as if it were knitting? Are we too comfortable with trouble? One of the most important secrets is to always move forward.

Evelyn McPhail, the Co-Chair of the National Republican Party, was raised in an orphanage, The Palmer Home, which is located behind our campus. Remembering her life and days at the Palmer Home she said, "...and from there I just never have slowed down" (*The Commercial Dispatch*, July 30, 1991). She has moved rapidly up the ranks in everything she has done, whether it be in political parties or in her church or country.

The last secret of life from our alums is that action is critical. I need not tell a group of women like the ones assembled in this room how important actions and energy are. These lessons are nothing new to you, but they are lessons that have stood the test of time and ones of which we need to be reminded.

Typically, when defining leadership, we go through a whole list of characteristics like vision, energy, and persistence. Think about the vision that mothers have for their children. There is no greater, more loving vision, in my opinion. The list of leadership attributes, characteristics and skills also would include passion, drive, communication, doing your homework, listening, solving problems, helping others develop, dedication, influencing, inspiring, counseling,

and facilitating. When I go through that list, I think all of those are characteristics and traits that, through the millenniums, women have been noted for — having developed because of their roles — subordinate roles that required developing these invaluable skills and attributes.

Each of us, if you go through that list, has some of the greatest skills that are now touted in the contemporary corporate world and education - as most essential - communication, facilitating, helping develop others, having a vision, passion, drive, not necessarily having authority, but being able to influence. These are all skills that we have and ones which are required to meet the major challenges of the new millennium. To realize that most of us already have these skills by virtue of who we are and how we were raised, female. The challenge is to transfer these skills and use them in the new professional arenas to which we are being allowed entry. The fact is, we have always been good at these things.

Lenore Prather, who is the first woman Supreme Court Judge in Mississippi, talked about the requirements of success: you have to look right, have the right education, the right experience, and the right ties and community involvement. "The W's" secret is that an emphasis should be not on just one characteristic, but on the entire person.

From a personal perspective, as president of an institution that is primarily for women, one of the biggest challenges I see for women leaders is to personally take care of ourselves. It has already been said at our table today that our jobs happen to be among the loneliest positions that a person can hold. There are not as many of us as there will be two, five, or ten years from now. So being a woman leader is still somewhat new ground, and we are plowing new territories. Someone was saying earlier that it took a lot of years before anyone accepted the notion that a woman could administer an elementary school, then a junior high, then a high school. The fact is, there will be more of us, but for now there are still too few of us.

There is reason for concern for women leaders. Too many women leaders try to copy men not only in leadership styles but in lifestyle. Statistics document that more and more women are smoking, especially young women. More and more women try to hold their own in terms of imbibing alcohol. I am not Carrie Nation nor a proselytizing preacher, but the fact is, women emulating the lifestyles of males is a literal dead end for women. Many studies already link alcohol intake to breast cancer. We know that smoking and even breathing the smoke of someone is related to lung cancer (and to premature wrinkling), and yet, women

are the ones who are doing it more than ever. A secret to life is something our mothers have taught for centuries, take care of yourself.

Recently our student newspaper ran an article on sexually transmitted diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases are rampant. For the first time ever, men and women are on a level playing field in terms of the ultimate risks of sexually transmitted diseases and, therefore, sexual promiscuity. And, given AIDS, that risk is death from promiscuity and excessive sexual activity. There are other risks for women that are simply tolerated. For example, yeast infections in American women are epidemic. Turn on the television and see the ads. We now know that abuse of antibiotics and diets of highly processed foods and sugar are related to these infections. Furthermore, there are controversial theories that suggest that repeated yeast infections are a symptom of and/or related to an impaired immune system, which can have all sorts of not yet fully understood health consequences. I think it is interesting, but not surprising, that over 30 years ago one of our alums, Dr. Elizabeth Hazen, discovered with another woman scientist an antifungal medicine that is still used today for the treatment of yeast infections.

As leaders, women should make it a high priority to encourage young women to take better care of themselves. We need to take care of ourselves. We

need to pay attention to our environment, what we eat and behavioral patterns that can damage our health.

A health letter from the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center documented recently that friends and social support can make a critical difference in your health. As a substance called catecholamine increases, immune systems are impaired and cardiovascular damage can result. The amount of this damaging substance is purported to be directly related to having a support system.

I go back to the fact that so many women, as they move into leadership roles today, are, in fact, lonely. We know from research that men emotionally depend on women and women tend to give, give, give.

My message to you today, that we have learned from "The W," is that it is important to take care of yourself, your friendships, and your support system. That very much will determine whether or not you will have the number one requirement for entering a leadership position, stamina, which is also essential for sustaining oneself in such a position.

I was recently struck by a line in a Eudora Welty short story. It said "she has spent her life trying to escape the parlorlike jaws of self-consciousness" ("Old Mr. Marblehall," *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, 1980). My message to you is to move away from being self-conscious as a woman and trying to be

anything that you are not or feeling inadequate. Come into your own as a person, a woman - do not be self-conscious about attacking and helping lead attacks on things that are crucial to women. I was stunned when I heard Pat Shroeder say some years ago that there was only \$75 million being spent on breast cancer, and yet, one out of nine women in American die from it. Do not be afraid, do not be self-conscious to tackle major issues. If you do not do it as the leaders of this nation's educational institutions, no one will do it. We need to overcome self-consciousness, we need to laugh, we need to think that the best will happen to us, not the worst. We need to follow our instincts. We need to know who we are and what we value, value what we value, and help the rest of the world understand. We need to eat right, live right, laugh, love, and do what you love and be who you really are.

The words of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, our newest female United States Supreme Court Justice, are inspiring to me and give me courage. In a tribute to her mother, she said, "I have a last thank you. It is to my mother, Celia Master Bader, the bravest and strongest person I have known, who was taken from me much too soon. I pray that I may be all that she would have been, had she lived in an age when women could aspire and achieve, and daughters are cherished as much as sons" (*USA TODAY*, June 16, 1993). You and I are lucky. We live in

an age where daughters are beginning to be as cherished as sons. We are living in an age where there truly are no limits to what we can do if we let ourselves be free to be who we are.

William James has said the greatest discovery of this century is we can change our lives by changing the way we think. I think women need to change some of the ways they think, particularly about themselves and other women. And, when we do, we will know the wisdom and the value of what Eudora Welty said in the last line of *One Writer's Beginnings*, "For all serious daring starts from within." This is an inscription over our Administration Building, Eudora Welty Hall, at "The W" - the only words of a woman inscribed in 1991 on a campus with buildings dating back to 1860. We have quotes from Tennyson, Shakespeare, and others, but hers are the only words of wisdom from a woman.

When you do that, look inside yourself and realize that it all begins in you - and then you dare - again, quoting wonderful Eudora Welty, you will feel like: "This time, when his [her] heart leapt, something — his [her] soul — seemed to leap, too, like a little colt invited out of a pen" ("Death of a Traveling Salesman," *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, 1936). We are like little colts. We are being invited out of the pen. We are being invited to ride in the wagon. We are being invited to lead, and indeed we are leading. We have the skills. We have the

mindset. We have the abilities, and we have the heart. It has been there, and now, we have arenas in which to apply them. As Eudora Welty said, "For all serious daring begins within" (*One Writer's Beginnings*, 1984). It is up to you.

The final secret of life, as Miss Welty has written, "The excursion is the same when you go looking for your sorrow as when you go looking for your joy" (*The Wide Net*, 1943). It is my hope that you will look for your joy and not look for your sorrow by taking care of yourself and applying some of these "secrets" in your life. Then, you may feel as I do so often, when I read and dwell on the works of women who have done remarkable things, again, in Miss Welty's words, "All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world" (*The Optimists's Daughter*, 1978). We live in an age where the confluence of activities and variables have come together to free us, to help us be on the wagon, to be a part, to lead. This is ours but for the seizing of it.

Thank you very much.